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Inventing the Way of the Samurai

*Nationalism, Internationalism,
and Bushido in Modern Japan*

Oleg Benesch



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OLEG BENESCH

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Introduction

The history of chivalry in Europe has shown that temporal separation need not dull the longing for a past ideal, and the romanticization of chivalric codes did not decline as the centuries passed between medieval knighthood and its supposed ideological heritage. The popular appeal of knightly tales in the early seventeenth century inspired Cervantes to satirize it in *Don Quixote*, while Mark Twain mocked similar nineteenth-century currents in the United States in *A Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889). The continued influence of the chivalric ideal in Europe can be seen in institutions such as the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (established 1917), Ordine al Merito della Repubblica Italiana (1951), and Ordre national du Mérite (1963). The traditional awarding of knighthoods to honour outstanding individuals reflects the popular view of chivalry as an ethic of exemplary behaviour, even if its specific prescriptions were not always clear or widely practised.

Discourse on the heritage of knighthood has not been limited to the West, however, and the concept most frequently compared with European chivalry can be found in Japan. From the last decade of the nineteenth century onwards, the origins and character of *bushidō* (the 'way of the samurai') have been subjects of debate among scholars, politicians, writers, and the general public in Japan and abroad.¹ *Bushidō* has been posited as the very 'soul' of the Japanese people, the 'animating spirit' and 'motor force' of the country long after the samurai class ceased to exist.² In its popular interpretation, the tenets ascribed to *bushidō* include courage, benevolence, politeness, selflessness, sincerity, honour, loyalty, self-control, and a strong sense of justice—virtues also found in texts romanticizing the European chivalric ideal. This similarity is not coincidental, as the first significant discussions of modern *bushidō* were directly inspired by English discourse on the roots of the gentleman in medieval knighthood. One of the greatest revivals of idealized knightly virtues in the modern world occurred in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, where reinterpretations of chivalry influenced education, architecture, literature, and art, as well as providing a rapidly industrializing society with moral

¹ Although the term '*bushidō*' (武士道) is frequently translated as 'the way of the warrior', or 'the way of the samurai', this translation becomes problematic when discussing the history of the subject, as it is only one of many terms found in Japanese texts dealing with the issue. For the sake of eliminating as much ambiguity as possible, this study will rely on Romanization of the original Japanese terms to the extent that it is practical to do so.

² Nitobe Inazo (1939), *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* (Tokyo: Kenkyusha), p. 98.

guidelines supposedly rooted in ancient and noble tradition.³ Conversely, the presence of so many familiar elements beneath an intriguing ‘Oriental’ veneer greatly aided a tremendous surge in Western interest in *bushidō* that occurred in the early twentieth century.

Today, *bushidō* frequently appears in popular Japanese culture, and is also invoked by politicians, business people, athletes, and other public figures. *Bushidō* has been suggested as the key factor behind Japanese economic success in the 1980s, as well as more recent achievements in international baseball and football (soccer) competitions. Commentators have credited *bushidō* with the composed public response to the 2011 Tohoku earthquake, tsunami, and subsequent nuclear crisis, while referring to workers at the damaged Fukushima power plant as ‘nuclear samurai’. In the past decade, some Japanese politicians have sought to reintroduce the ‘*bushidō* spirit’ into the Fundamental Education Law to address a perceived malaise among the nation’s youth attributed to a lack of moral education. Promoters of *bushidō* in the political sphere have been joined by senior military figures who use *bushidō* in their arguments for a more assertive foreign policy including overseas engagements, including overseas engagements. Given the role of *bushidō* as a prominent ideological support for Japanese militarism in Asia and the Pacific before 1945, this connection has similarly problematic connotations as statements by Western leaders invoking Crusader imagery with regard to military action in the Arab world.

In spite of the enduring popularity of *bushidō* in such diverse fields, the most influential work on the subject continues to be Nitobe Inazō’s (1862–1933) enigmatic *Bushido: the Soul of Japan* (1899), which often serves as a ‘textbook-like standard’.⁴ The resilience and unrivalled popularity of *Bushido: the Soul of Japan* are peculiar aspects of *bushidō* discourse, as it is only one of thousands of books and articles on the subject. The reasons behind the wealth of commentaries on *bushidō* in modern Japan reflect the great diversity of interpretations of the subject. The popular view holds that *bushidō* began to develop as a martial ethic in the late twelfth century, but that samurai were too preoccupied with warfare and practical matters to formally codify *bushidō* before the late sixteenth century. According to this account, aspects of *bushidō* evolved as the role of the samurai in Japanese society changed before being effectively eliminated by successive government reforms in the early Meiji period (1868–1912). It is commonly suggested that Nitobe Inazō formulated and popularized an idealized version of this martial ethic, which was appropriated and adapted by the Meiji, Taishō (1912–26), and early Shōwa (1926–89) governments as a ruling ideology that redirected loyalty from feudal lords to the emperor. The simplistic account of the development of *bushidō* is problematic, however, and relies on pre-war theories that conflated diverse historical

³ See Girouard, Mark (1981), *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (Yale University Press); Alexander, Michael (2007), *Medievalism: The Middle Ages in Modern England* (New Haven: Yale University Press).

⁴ Takahashi Tomio (1991), *Bushi no kokoro, Nihon no kokoro 2* (Tokyo: Kondō shuppansha), pp. 426–7.

periods and ideologies to provide legitimacy for the modern imperial state and nation.

In the early twentieth century, *bushidō* became a subject in both civilian and military education, from ethics instruction to history lessons. The *bushidō* found in the first new textbooks after the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5 was not exclusively chauvinistic, but evolved in this direction until a militaristic, emperor-focused interpretation of *bushidō* became a significant component of the ideological structures of the Japanese empire in the ‘dark valley’ of the 1930s and 1940s. During this period, an ‘imperial’ interpretation of *bushidō* became an important propaganda tool used to encourage and justify actions that led to the tragedies of the war in East Asia and the Pacific. Simultaneously, it was used by the Allies to objectify and dehumanize Japanese people as *bushidō*-driven automatons. The integration of *bushidō* ideology into the Japanese education system for almost forty years ensured that the concept retained a presence in the postwar era, albeit in different forms.

After 1945, many scholars dismissed what they regarded as corrupting modern developments in *bushidō* and turned to re-examining the historical samurai to draw conclusions regarding ‘traditional’ Japanese culture and behavioural patterns. In the past four decades, *bushidō* has been a common theme in popular and academic works seeking to explain a wide variety of phenomena, and students of Japanese history, culture, and language inevitably find themselves confronted with discussions of *bushidō*. The term is also used in the titles and marketing materials of films, books, comics, video games, and martial arts competitions in Japan and around the world. Instructors of Japanese-related subjects are often uncertain as to how to respond to questions regarding *bushidō*, or are frustrated by students’ expectations that they address the subject in depth. Norio Ota has discussed the great popularity of *bushidō* among students in the many countries where he has taught the Japanese language, and instead calls for the ‘re-discovery of the non-bushido tradition in Japan’. In Ota’s view, which is shared by many educators, *bushidō* overshadows non-martial elements of Japanese culture and society, as well as putting undue pressure on Japanese to identify with an ambiguous martial ideology.⁵ Shigeno Saburō expresses a similar view in *Against Bushidō (Han bushidō ron)* (2014), criticizing the tremendous popularity of what he considers an anachronistic ideology with no relevance to modern democratic society.⁶

For Japanese and foreign students of Japan, the inevitable encounter with *bushidō* raises problems due to the vast amount of material on the subject, which makes it difficult to obtain an accurate overview. On the other hand, there are few scholarly treatments of *bushidō*, especially in English. *Bushidō* was ignored by many scholars after 1945, until its popular revival in the 1970s and 1980s as people sought cultural factors to explain Japan’s economic success. Many historians during this time

⁵ Ota, Norio, ‘Re-discovery of the Non-Bushido Tradition in Japan’, paper presented on 3 Oct. 2010 at the 23rd Annual Conference of the Canadian Association for Japanese Studies, held at the University of British Columbia.

⁶ Shigeno Saburō (2014), *Han bushidō ron* (Tokyo: Bungeisha).

dismissed *bushidō* as an anachronism and its popularity as a passing phenomenon, a situation similar to that which occurred in 1912 when renowned Japanologist Basil Hall Chamberlain (1850–1935) attacked *bushidō* as a modern invention with no basis in earlier history.⁷ Chamberlain recalled that *bushidō* was virtually unknown little more than a decade earlier, and criticized it accordingly. Today, a great number of popular works are opposed by a handful of critical texts, and Nitobe's well-known and widely available work is often the first port of call for those seeking an introduction to *bushidō*. In spite of its influence and status as a classic text, however, *Bushido: the Soul of Japan* is of limited use for understanding the samurai or pre-Meiji history or thought. Instead, Nitobe's work and the reactions to it are far better suited as aids to understanding the dynamics of modern Japanese intellectual and social history, especially in the context of the search for identity in the newly international age in which he lived. Similarly, the revival of Nitobe's view of *bushidō* in the late twentieth century reveals a great deal about the political, social, and economic conditions from the 1980s to the present.

As Chamberlain's writings indicate, the study of *bushidō* is complicated by issues of terminology, specifically the confusion between the historical and historiographical use of the term '*bushidō*' itself. An obscure literary term before the 1890s, '*bushidō*' has become a broad descriptive word for Japanese samurai thought and behaviour.⁸ This is problematic in translations of historical documents into modern Japanese and other languages, which frequently render diverse terms such as *budō* (the martial way), *shidō* (the way of the samurai/gentleman), *hōkōnin no michi* (the way of the retainer), *otoko no michi* (the way of masculinity), *heidō* (the way of the soldier), and many others uniformly as *bushidō*, giving the impression that a homogenous and widely accepted tradition existed, when this is not supported by the evidence. A related source of confusion is the historiographic use of '*bushidō*', which can similarly imply the existence of a unified samurai ethical tradition. Ultimately, the most effective method of minimizing the confusion between historiographical and historical uses of '*bushidō*' is the use of historical terms specific to the relevant periods and locations, or, if the argument and evidence should warrant, neutral descriptors such as 'samurai ethics'. This is the approach taken in this study, which uses the term '*bushidō*' to refer to the ideology of the same name that developed from mid-Meiji onwards. In this context, the concepts '*bushidō*' and 'modern *bushidō*' are used synonymously, with the latter preferred in cases where confusion might otherwise arise.

COMPARATIVE CONTEXTS

The lack of examination of modern *bushidō* can be attributed to several factors. The sudden popular revival of *bushidō* in the 1980s made some scholars reluctant

⁷ Chamberlain, Basil Hall (1912), *The Invention of a New Religion* (London: Rationalist Press).

⁸ For a more detailed overview of the etymology and development of the term '*bushidō*', including its first appearance in the seventeenth century and its absence from Edo-period popular culture, see Benesch, Oleg (2011), *Bushido: The Creation of a Martial Ethic in Late Meiji Japan* (PhD dissertation at the University of British Columbia), pp. 5–14.

to address what appeared to be a passing phenomenon with little or no historical basis. Another factor was the difficulty of obtaining a broader historical perspective on the 1980s, as scholars working in the last two decades of the twentieth century were also 'living' this history. These factors were compounded by the lack of examination of pre-war *bushidō* discourse, which has resulted in uncertainty regarding the nature and origins of the concept, making it difficult to approach and contextualize. The major gaps in the study of *bushidō* complicate not only our understanding of modern discourses on the subject, but can also influence research into earlier Japanese history. This study builds on and reassesses the existing scholarship as it examines the development of modern *bushidō*. The approach taken is generally chronological, while also referring to the broader significance of texts and historical events where this is warranted. By examining the historical processes that contributed to the development of modern *bushidō*, this study revisits several fundamental issues that have not been adequately resolved, in order to explain the continued popularity of the concept.

The notion that *bushidō* is a modern invention has been put forth by a number of scholars over the past century, but this view has failed to make a sufficient impact on popular discourse. Both popular culture and many scholarly works continue to treat *bushidō* as a traditional ethic originally codified and/or practised by samurai. This is partially due to the nature of works critical of the historical pedigree of *bushidō*, which tend to either dismiss the concept as a modern invention or criticize the historical accuracy of specific interpretations, especially Nitobe's *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*. While essentially correct, these critical approaches often lack persuasiveness as they do not provide a sufficiently detailed or convincing alternative narrative for the development of modern *bushidō*. Due to the sheer number and variety of *bushidō* theories, critiques of specific interpretations tend to leave unaffected *bushidō* discourse as a whole. Similarly, it is not possible to prove that a samurai ethic did not exist through a positivistic approach to pre-Meiji Japanese history. Historians of medieval and early modern Japan have not found any widely accepted ethical systems that could be convincingly portrayed as the origins of modern *bushidō*, but this does not preclude the discovery of such an ethic in the future, however unlikely this may be. For this reason, the classification of *bushidō* as a modern invention requires a detailed examination of its development.

In addition to providing a narrative of the development of *bushidō* as a modern invention, this study considers a number of related issues. First, if *bushidō* is a modern invention, who invented it? As this study shows, *bushidō* was not invented by either nationalistic traditionalists or Nitobe Inazō, but originated in a confluence of intellectual and social trends around the overseas journeys of journalist and politician Ozaki Yukio (1858–1954) in the late 1880s. Ozaki's comments on *bushidō* as a potential counterpart to English chivalry and the English 'gentleman-ship' that he idealized inspired a discourse on *bushidō* among some of the most progressive and internationally experienced Japanese thinkers in the early 1890s. So successful was this development that, by the end of the decade, English observers of Japan unfavourably compared the 'degeneration' of European chivalry with the 'unbroken' heritage of the samurai spirit. The high profile of English ideals in

Meiji Japan is reflected in the history of the word ‘gentlemanship’, in regular use in English from the sixteenth to the early twentieth century.⁹ ‘Gentlemanship’ largely disappeared from the English language after this time, replaced by the related terms ‘gentlemanhood’ and ‘gentlemanliness’; however, it survives in Japanese as ‘*jentorumanshippu*’, reflecting usage when the concept of the ‘English gentleman’ was first introduced to Japan.

Second, is *bushidō* uniquely Japanese? In spite of its source of inspiration, Meiji *bushidō* was certainly not a mere copy of foreign ideals. On the other hand, the widespread view that *bushidō* is a singular national ethic that somehow explains the Japanese ‘character’, is also problematic. While certainly unique in its specific combination of cultural and social influences, the invention of *bushidō* follows patterns found in other societies dealing with issues of tradition, modernity, progress, and national identity as part of the process of modernization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Eric Hobsbawm has referred to the period 1870–1914 as one of ‘mass production of tradition’ in Europe, and similar processes followed in many other parts of the world, albeit with varying delays.¹⁰ Accordingly, scholarship on the invention of tradition, which has already been applied to other aspects of modern Japan, is relevant to the study of *bushidō*.¹¹ Research on the invention and development of the *bushidō* tradition should further include comparative elements, as the earliest *bushidō* theorists were strongly influenced by and sometimes explicitly followed contemporary developments in the West. In contrast, foreign commentators, most prominently in China and the West, were also enamoured with the developing *bushidō* discourse and hoped to (re)import aspects of it in order to improve their own societies.

A third question arises from the staying power of *bushidō*. How did it become widely accepted as a traditional ethic, and how was it revived repeatedly after falling out of fashion when other ideological constructs were not? While taking a comparative approach, this study also examines those aspects of the invention of *bushidō* that were unique to Japan, and which have contributed significantly to its continued popularity. Many characteristics of *bushidō* are indeed found in comparable ideologies in other societies that often served as models for *bushidō* theorists, but the development of *bushidō* depended on the unique combination of social, political, and intellectual currents within Japan’s specific historical experience. The reasons behind the great popularity of *bushidō* today can be found in the earliest Meiji discourse on the subject: *bushidō* was initially developed by a progressive, internationalist group of individuals whose ideals resonated more with postwar Japanese thought than with many of their contemporaries. The popular *bushidō* of today shares many characteristics with the *bushidō* theories of the 1890s, which

⁹ Bradley, Henry (1901), *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles: Founded Mainly on the Materials Collected by the Philological Society*, vols. 4, F and G (Oxford: Clarendon Press), p. 120.

¹⁰ Hobsbawm, Eric J. (1983), ‘Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe 1870–1914’, in Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 263–307.

¹¹ See the essays in Vlastos, Stephen (ed.) (1998), *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

established the concept in Japan and gave it the historical legitimacy and flexibility that enabled it to survive the turbulent twentieth century. *Bushidō* is unusual in its resilience in contrast with the majority of nationalistic concepts appropriated for ideological service by the militaristic state in the years before 1945 and rejected along with it immediately after. These others have not recovered and today are found primarily in rightist discourse.

Stephen Vlastos has provided a model for the examination of modern invented traditions, arguing that ‘establishing their invention is only the first step. The significant findings will be historical and contextual. How, by whom, and to what social and political effect are certain practices and ideas formulated, institutionalized, and propagated as *tradition*?’¹² These latter issues are significant, as they determine whether an invented narrative becomes accepted and assumes the role of tradition. In this context, the more varied and complex the answers to Vlastos’ questions, the greater the resilience of the invented tradition in question. Focusing especially on the period from the late eighteenth century to the present, Eric Hobsbawm sees invented traditions as belonging to three overlapping types:

- a) those establishing or symbolizing social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities, b) those establishing or legitimizing institutions, status, or relations of authority, and c) those whose main purpose was socialization, the inculcation of beliefs, value systems, and conventions of behaviour.¹³

These categories are useful for examining *bushidō*, as it served all three functions at various times. *Bushidō* was first debated around 1890 as a Hobsbawm type c) invented tradition, and was popularized as a type a) after 1895. In the early twentieth century, *bushidō* became an ideological tool of type b) used by the Japanese government, while maintaining characteristics of a) and c). After 1945, *bushidō* returned as an invented tradition of type a), although there have been concerted efforts to re-establish it as a type c) in the past decade. This broad applicability of *bushidō*, which is a function of the fluid nature of its content, has been a primary factor behind its resilience.

Responding to the work of Vlastos and others, Dipesh Chakrabarty discusses some of the issues that have been raised by Hobsbawm’s analytical model, pointing out that while especially effective ‘as a tool for unmasking “ideology”, in particular the ideologies of the nation-state and capitalism’, problems arise when the ideology thus exposed is viewed as a vacuum to be filled by historical ‘reality’.¹⁴ This can be seen in a few of the critical works on *bushidō* that began to appear in the early twentieth century. Okakura Kakuzō (Tenshin, 1862–1913), for example, rejected *bushidō* and sought to replace it with a peaceful ‘teaism’, while Hagiwara Sakutarō (1886–1942) similarly argued for the primacy of pacifistic aesthetic traditions in

¹² Vlastos, Stephen (1998), ‘Tradition: Past/Present Culture and Modern Japanese History’, in Stephen Vlastos (ed.), *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 5.

¹³ Hobsbawm, Eric J., ‘Mass-Producing Traditions’, p. 9.

¹⁴ Chakrabarty, Dipesh (1998), ‘Afterword: Revisiting the Tradition/Modernity Binary’, in Stephen Vlastos (ed.), *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 287.

Japan. Okakura, Hagiwara, and a minority of other dissenting voices dismissed *bushidō* as a modern invention and attempted to replace it with their own 'real' traditions, but these were merely cases of substituting one invented tradition with another.¹⁵ For critics of *bushidō*—including many people in Japan—it is important to understand and expose its processes of invention as a way of countering the *bushidō* stereotype of Japanese having an inherently martial character, a view that many find inaccurate and frustrating. Recent studies have supported the contention that arguments pertaining to the nature of a 'national character' of any group are problematic, even more so if these are based on specific agendas rather than 'disinterested' research and observation.¹⁶

The use of concepts such as 'invented tradition' and 'ideology' is complicated by issues of definition. John Gerring has identified dozens of different definitions for the latter concept alone.¹⁷ This study does not seek to engage comprehensively with the debates on these concepts, but the ways in which they are understood here should be discussed briefly. The often ambiguous and evolving nature of modern *bushidō* prevents the concept from fitting neatly into any established categories. Here, *bushidō* is treated primarily as an invented tradition and ideology, with the understanding that these concepts are distinct but can overlap significantly. Not all invented traditions are ideologies, and certainly not all ideologies are invented traditions. In its most common usage, however, as a traditional samurai ethic and/or defining trait of the Japanese 'national character', *bushidō* is best treated as an invented tradition, with the specific context and content of this usage determining its ideological character.

One criticism of the exegetical model of the invention of tradition has been that as human constructs, traditions are constantly changing and evolving, making it difficult to argue for their specific invention. This may disqualify some traditions from examination using this conceptual framework, but as a tradition with a clearly definable period of invention at the end of the nineteenth century, *bushidō* meets a narrower definition of invented tradition. From the late 1880s onward, *bushidō* has been continually reinvented in different ways, often by the same individuals. Sometimes these have been cases of almost pure invention with no connection to earlier history aside from the term '*bushidō*', while in other cases specific historical sources and terminology have been used in attempts to reanimate what were believed to be historical traditions. Ultimately, however, all modern *bushidō* theories are later constructs with no direct continuity from pre-Meiji history, while it is precisely the claims to such continuity that make *bushidō* an invented tradition.

Much of the legitimacy of *bushidō* has come from its alleged historical roots as a traditional ethic, even if these were not supported by the evidence. With its status

¹⁵ Bialock, David T. (2000), 'Nation and Epic: *The Tale of the Heike* as a Modern Classic', in Haruo Shirane (ed.), *Inventing the Classics: Modernity, National Identity, and Japanese Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), p. 162.

¹⁶ McCrae, R. R. 'Cross-Cultural Research on the Five-Factor Model of Personality (Version 2)', *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture* (Unit 6, Chapter 1/V2) June, 2009.

¹⁷ Gerring, John (2001), *Social Science Methodology: A Criterial Framework* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press), pp. 71–86.

as an invented tradition firmly in mind, this study also treats *bushidō* as one of many ideologies in modern Japan. Some of these ideologies were invented traditions, most were admittedly modern, and many were imports from the West. Social Darwinism, for example, was an ideological construct that took its legitimacy from supposedly scientific ideas of progress rather than tradition, and became influential throughout East Asia. In comparing *bushidō* with other ideologies of modern Japan, it can be useful to focus on their commonalities, and the characteristic of being an invented tradition may not always be the most relevant aspect of *bushidō* in this context.

In treating *bushidō* as an ideology, this study uses 'ideology' in a similar way to Malcolm Hamilton's definition of the concept:

An ideology is a system of collectively held normative and reputedly factual ideas and beliefs and attitudes advocating a particular pattern of social relationships and arrangements, and/or aimed at justifying a particular pattern of conduct, which its proponents seek to promote, realise, pursue or maintain.¹⁸

In her work on modern Japanese ideologies, Carol Gluck sees ideology as an 'essential social element... All societies produce ideologies which in turn help to reproduce the social order. [this definition avoids] the common, but restrictive, equation of ideology with a systematic and manipulative political program'. This latter distinction is significant with regard to *bushidō* ideology, as the emphasis on its use in military education and propaganda, especially in early Shōwa, can obscure the diversity of the discourse. According to Gluck, at no point in modern Japan was there a monolithic ideology or ideology production process.¹⁹ Even a seemingly cohesive ideology such as *bushidō* was the result of complex interactions between many different individuals and groups with widely varying motivations, who were subjected to a plethora of social and cultural factors.

The broad consensus established around the turn of the twentieth century on the existence of a *bushidō* tradition masked the diversity of the underlying discourses. While *bushidō* began its modern life as a native Japanese equivalent of European chivalry and 'gentlemanliness', it soon came to be interpreted as a 'way of the samurai', drawing upon the former martial class, and subsequently as a more esoteric 'way of the warrior' rooted in mythohistory and related to the nation's divine and unique spirit. The existence of these various *bushidō*s, which overlapped, combined, and competed for popular acceptance, was crucial to the long-term survival of the ideology over the course of more than a century of upheaval and change. Once invented and disseminated in its myriad forms, the *bushidō* tradition was selectively altered and redefined to suit the needs of its interpreters, Japanese and foreign, without losing its apparent historical legitimacy. Conversely, *bushidō* experienced its greatest crises when too successfully tied to a specific person, period, or ideology that was subsequently discredited or otherwise fell out of

¹⁸ Hamilton, Malcolm B., 'The Elements of the Concept of Ideology', *Political Studies* 35:1 (March 1987), p. 38.

¹⁹ Gluck, Carol (1985), *Japan's Modern Myths* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), pp. 6–7.

favour. Ultimately, *bushidō* was able to weather these storms due to the inherent diversity from its organic development in Meiji, which allowed it to rebound relatively quickly even as its ideological partners were relegated to history.

Inevitable changes in intellectual, social, and political conditions mean that even the most resilient ideologies do not retain an unwaveringly high profile in a single field over decades. At times of great upheaval, especially, ideologies become linked with one another or with certain concepts, and subsequently decline together. *Bushidō* has endured because its flexibility has allowed it to move between different genres and spheres of discourse, rising and falling at various times. Accordingly, this volume traces the evolution of *bushidō* through a variety of intellectual, popular, political, educational, and other discourses to provide a continuous narrative of its development, rather than examining its trajectory in any one area in which its influence may have waxed and waned.

OVERVIEW

As Eric Hobsbawm has argued, the invention of tradition should be expected to ‘occur more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which “old” traditions had been designed’.²⁰ In this context, Chapter 1 examines a form of nostalgic *bushidō* discourse that arose in the turbulent environment of the 1850s and 1860s, marked by the involvement of prominent activist figures such as Yoshida Shōin (1830–59) and Yokoi Shōnan (1809–69). A number of late Edo period (c.1603–1868) thinkers received considerable exposure in modern *bushidō* discourse, especially after 1900, and their close temporal proximity to modern theorists means that they have often been considered as bridges between Edo and Meiji *bushidō*. The content of *bushidō* in the last fifteen years of the Edo period (‘Bakumatsu’) was specific to the period and to certain groups active at the time, however, and its influence on modern Meiji *bushidō* is in need of review.

Chapter 1 discusses the formative influences on Bakumatsu *bushidō*, in the absence of an established and continuing tradition of samurai ethics for thinkers to draw upon. Bakumatsu commentators were largely critical of their own time and instead looked to a romanticized distant past before the alleged decline of the samurai. These nostalgic—or, strictly speaking, antiquarian—views of the samurai followed a pattern that had been repeated for several centuries. As Fred Davis argues, ‘Whatever in our present situation evokes it, nostalgia *uses the past*—falsely, accurately, or . . . in specially reconstructed ways—but it is not a product thereof’.²¹ Tales of samurai in the Edo period tended to be idealized accounts of medieval warriors that emphasized combat, bravery, and glory—martial elements that were deemed to be in short supply during the era of peace under Tokugawa family rule

²⁰ Hobsbawm, Eric J., ‘Introduction: Inventing Traditions’, in Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 4.

²¹ Davis, Fred (1979), *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (The Free Press), pp. 10–11.

(c.1600–1868). In contrast, discussions of ethics and contemporary issues tended to be phrased in Confucian terms and their applicability was not typically limited to the samurai.

Just as arguments linking the few Bakumatsu writers on *bushidō* to earlier discourse are often problematic, the first chapter also reconsiders the impact Bakumatsu discourse had on Meiji developments. This latter influence, although significant, occurred after *bushidō* discourse had already become established after the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–5, and Edo *bushidō* theorists did not have a direct connection to or formative influence on the first modern exponents of the subject. This situation was directly related to popular perceptions of the samurai in early Meiji, when the former class distinctions were abolished and many samurai fell into poverty as they struggled to adapt to the rapidly changing social order. A number of rebellions in the 1870s contributed to negative views of the samurai, and the idea that a samurai-based ethic should serve as a model for the whole nation had little popular appeal through the 1880s.

Chapter 2 is concerned with the origins of modern *bushidō* in the period from the late 1880s to the beginning of a popular ‘*bushidō* boom’ after 1895. Specifically, it examines the writings of Ozaki Yukio and the handful of commentators on his *bushidō* theories active before the Sino-Japanese War. Their works drove the development of later *bushidō* discourse, and were in turn strongly influenced by three broad trends in Japanese thought at the time. The first of these was the maturation of Japan’s relationship with the West, a process marked by a more nuanced re-evaluation of the idealistic adoration or rejection that defined attitudes towards the West held by many Japanese thinkers in early Meiji. The second factor was a change in Japan’s views of China, which became increasingly negative in the years leading up to the Sino-Japanese War. The third factor that influenced the first generation of modern *bushidō* theorists was an increased interest in their nation’s culture. Whereas Japanese in the 1880s would still claim to be embarrassed by traditional aspects of their culture in front of foreigners, by the early 1890s interest and pride in their own heritage was growing rapidly. The interplay between these three trends was evolving and influenced individual *bushidō* theorists to varying degrees, but the trends were important to all of them.

In addition to these broader trends, the presence of a foreign ‘other’ or ‘others’ was an essential element in the development of modern *bushidō* discourse, and the first formulators of *bushidō* were equally or more influenced by current events beyond Japan’s borders than they were by the historical samurai class. In this vein, the rehabilitation of the samurai image in the context of *bushidō* was inspired by contemporary European discourse on chivalry and ‘gentlemanliness’, which served to legitimize the search for comparable sources of morality in the historical Japanese equivalent of knighthood. This development had a reciprocal influence on trends in historiography that sought to redefine the Japanese past in terms of European models, with concepts such as ‘feudalism’ and ‘medieval’ gaining broad acceptance. Within a decade, Westerners and Japanese would come to see Japanese society as the heir of medieval knighthood and as a potential model for other nations to channel the strength of their own feudal past.

Chapter 3 examines the ‘*bushidō* boom’ that began soon after the Sino-Japanese War, and traces its development through the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905. Buoyed by the success of the earlier conflict, much Japanese thought became increasingly nationalistic, and it was natural that a ‘native’ ethic such as *bushidō* would gain broad currency during this period. Whereas earlier *bushidō* theories tended to be more ‘internationalist’ than nationalistic, the character of discourse changed considerably after 1895. The newly confident and often chauvinistic *bushidō* that marked the *bushidō* boom of late Meiji built on the earlier foundations but quickly superseded them. This change in tone even led early *bushidō* theorist Uemura Masahisa (1858–1925) to criticize the appropriation of the concept by nationalistic and militaristic elements in 1898.

Uemura’s frustration at the ‘misuse’ of *bushidō* reveals one of the greatest strengths of the ethic: resilience. The legitimacy bestowed on the concept by its alleged relationship with the historical samurai, combined with a lack of concrete historical roots that could be used to define or refute it, meant that *bushidō* was an ideal vehicle for nationalist sentiments of the type that came to the fore around 1900. As a concept with national relevancy, *bushidō* was implicitly used in the process of integrating Japan’s many strong regional identities into a unified whole. Important branches of the military and government were dominated by people from certain regions until well into the twentieth century, resulting in considerable dissatisfaction among those without these connections. Emphasizing local samurai heroes, incidents, and ideals was a method of boosting regional pride, while at the same time integrating these local manifestations of *bushidō* into broader discourse helped promote acceptance of a greater national identity.

Bushidō combined easily with other concepts such as *Yamato damashii* (the national ‘Yamato spirit’ supposedly originating in Japan’s ancient kingdom of that name) and *kokutai* (national polity) to form nationalistic and militaristic ideologies. This volume examines the roles of the 1898 journal *Bushidō*, Nitobe Inazō, and the philosopher Inoue Tetsujirō (1855–1944) in the spread and development of *bushidō*. Nitobe’s significance to Meiji *bushidō* theory was not nearly as great as his current reputation would indicate, but he was also involved in the discourse from a considerably earlier time than is generally assumed. In contrast, Inoue Tetsujirō was the undoubted primate of *bushidō* from 1901 until 1945, and was instrumental in developing the government-sanctioned and emperor-focused ‘imperial’ *bushidō* that became a highly influential ideology from the Russo-Japanese War onwards.

It was only during the second half of the *bushidō* boom, from 1905 until 1914, that *bushidō* became a widely popular subject in Japan and abroad. Chapter 4 examines how imperial *bushidō* ideology became firmly established, and how this and other *bushidō* interpretations spread throughout literature, academia, sport, religion, and other spheres of public life. Through government support and legitimization by Inoue and other official figures, *bushidō* came to play a central role in military and civilian education, especially with the growth of spiritual education programmes used to indoctrinate troops with the desired virtues of loyalty and self-sacrifice. Imperial *bushidō* also played a key role in the national ethics

education programme known as 'National Morality', outlined by Inoue in a series of articles and books beginning in 1908. At the same time, the popularity and unquestioned patriotic credentials of *bushidō* led to its frequent mention by writers of literature and popular fiction, while academics wrote many volumes on the subject. Members of religious orders and promoters of various types of sport, native and foreign, called upon *bushidō* to popularize their causes and give them the patriotic legitimacy deemed so important at the time. Foreign interpreters of Japan also showed great interest in *bushidō*, further raising its profile. By the end of the Meiji period, Japanese public life was saturated with *bushidō*, and there were few Japanese or foreigners interested in Japan who had not heard of it and some of its tenets.

Trends at the time of the Meiji emperor's (1852–1912) death indicated that *bushidō* would continue to expand its reach, but this was not to be the case. Chapter 5 discusses the sudden decline of *bushidō* around 1914, which was closely tied to the end of Meiji period and the dramatic suicide of General Nogi Maresuke (1849–1912). After examining the influences that led to this change in *bushidō*'s fortunes, this chapter discusses the state of *bushidō* discourse in the Taishō period before its popular revival in early Shōwa. Analysis of *bushidō*'s role in the 1910s and 1920s reveals that the strengths and resilience that characterized modern *bushidō* from its origins in late Meiji made a resurrection of the concept not only possible, but highly likely. While *bushidō* lost its popular appeal soon after Meiji, it had become established in the education system and retained its presence and legitimacy as a historical ethic in the minds of most Japanese.

In the 1930s, this high degree of recognition allowed *bushidō* to become a key component of the legitimizing ideology of the imperial state, and the *bushidō* of this period fulfilled many of the criteria used by Marxist scholars of functional ideology as a 'systematic and manipulative political program'.²² Chapter 6 examines the practical application of *bushidō* in the military and in general education texts such as the notorious *Principles of the National Polity* (*Kokutai no hongi*) and other materials used for 'spiritual education'. The lines between civilian and military life became increasingly blurred as the 1930s progressed, with the country sinking deeper into conflict with China while preparing for an expanded total war. When this came in the early 1940s, *bushidō* had a major influence on the wartime behaviour of Japanese troops and their adversaries, whereby the illusion of the importance of *bushidō* ideology could be more devastating than the acts it inspired. This was manifested in Japanese troops' legitimate attempts to surrender, which were often treated with suspicion by Allied forces and dealt with using lethal force.

While *bushidō* was a key component of the ideological militarization of society in early Shōwa, it also reached new levels of dissemination in popular culture during this same period. The large-scale promotion and dominance of imperial *bushidō* often obscures the continuing diversity of discourse, however, and a number of significant critics of the state-sponsored interpretation emerged from all sides of the political spectrum. This chapter examines a number of the challenges faced by

²² Gluck, Carol, *Japan's Modern Myths*, p. 7.

imperial *bushidō*, including issues resulting from its problematic historiography and the fantastical elements introduced to *bushidō* by the official emperor-centred ideology. Conversely, a number of rightists criticized *bushidō* for not inculcating sufficient imperial loyalty, while others invoked it to justify violent attacks on the government in the name of the emperor. The great breadth of these discourses added to the cumulative exposure to *bushidō* among the population, and contributed significantly to its perceived legitimacy and acceptance.

Chapter 7 broadly examines the trajectory of *bushidō* discourse in the postwar period, when the concept went through further cycles of popularization and decline. After 1945, most people strongly rejected imperial *bushidō* along with other wartime ideologies, and *bushidō* as a whole was largely ignored in the immediate postwar. Due to the diversity of Shōwa discourse, however, *bushidō* soon began to be revived, largely shorn of militarism and other problematic elements. Many scholars who had written on the subject before 1945 were able to revise their theories for the new order, although some continued to promote imperial *bushidō* largely unchanged. Academic historians were among the most engaged participants in postwar *bushidō* discourse, with many motivated to respond to the popular perception that *bushidō* had been corrupted in early Shōwa. The dominant approach was to seek ‘real’ *bushidō* in sources relating to the premodern samurai, often with little consideration for modern influences. This development was reflected in popular developments when *bushidō* began to attract broader interest again in the 1960s, with these interpretations also focusing on the period before Meiji and ignoring modern trends.

The late 1960s saw a minor revival of a more nationalistic *bushidō*, with novelist and playwright Mishima Yukio (1925–70) its most representative and popular figure. This revival was fairly short-lived, however, as Mishima’s dramatic suicide by *seppuku* in 1970 had a similarly shocking effect on mainstream society as General Nogi’s death almost sixty years before. This incident conveyed the image of *bushidō* as an anachronistic and potentially extreme ideology, and it remained largely the domain of historians and cultural theorists. From the 1980s, *bushidō* experienced another, more lasting popular revival, this time centred on the theories of Nitobe Inazō. The pacifism, internationalism, and morality inherent in Nitobe’s work resonates with segments of contemporary society, although more nationalistic *bushidō* interpretations are also finding favour among conservatives and figures close to the military. Chapter 7 considers this most recent and ongoing resurgence of *bushidō*. Contemporary *bushidō* is deeply indebted to previously neglected prewar writings, as commentators on both sides of the political spectrum have turned to Meiji and early Shōwa *bushidō* texts and ideas to promote their postwar agendas.

1

Before *Bushidō*: Considering Samurai Thought and Identity

SAMURAI IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The development of *bushidō* was an essentially modern phenomenon, with core symbols borrowed from the historical samurai. Modern theorists often carefully selected aspects of earlier history, philosophy, and legend to support their specific *bushidō* interpretations. This process of appropriation tended to ignore or distort the historical contexts of the texts and tales used as evidence, and the effects of this are still evident. While the samurai were a useful quarry for modern *bushidō* theorists to mine, their historical reality could also be problematic for *bushidō* discourse. In the Meiji period (1868–1912), negative popular views regarding the condition of the *shizoku*—former samurai—made the wide dissemination of a warrior-based ethic unlikely, and the inspiration for *bushidō* ultimately came from elsewhere. These complications also meant that it took more than a decade from the publication of the first significant texts promoting *bushidō* in the late 1880s to the concept becoming a household word in the early twentieth century.

When *bushidō* discourse did develop, many of its proponents unconsciously followed certain patterns common to earlier texts regarding the samurai. The most striking similarity was a pronounced nostalgia for a vanished martial ideal that the writers had not personally experienced, but were convinced had existed in the past. In this sense, although there is no compelling evidence for the existence of a meaningful or widely accepted samurai ethic before Meiji, there were a few widespread assumptions that inspired texts which modern theorists later included in various *bushidō* canons. The selective nostalgia that Meiji promoters of *bushidō* felt for an earlier time was shared by many thinkers in the Edo period (c. 1603–1868), including those promoting Confucian ideas, the study of National Learning, as well as other schools of thought.

With regard to the later development of *bushidō*, the most significant nostalgia was that directed towards Japan's medieval period (c. late twelfth to late sixteenth centuries), which Edo commentators viewed as an age when warriors were still able to apply their martial skills and demonstrate their practical value on the battlefield. These idealized interpretations did not necessarily correspond to any historical reality, but they set a pattern for popular representations of medieval warriors that continues today. As Cameron Hurst and Karl Friday point out, most interpretations of *bushidō* in the twentieth century were not grounded in the historiography

of medieval Japan.¹ Elsewhere, Friday criticizes the retrospective idealization of the samurai, arguing that there was no significant ritual in early medieval warfare, let alone an accepted ethical system, while Hurst discusses the lack of martial codes in Japan before the seventeenth century.² Thomas Conlan emphasizes the pragmatic transactional basis of loyalty in fourteenth-century Japan, and his arguments can be seen partly as a response to *bushidō*-influenced popular conceptions of Japanese warriors.³ Current historians of medieval Japan do not consider *bushidō* a useful exegetical tool, and it is rarely found in their scholarship. The term '*bushidō*' has not been found in any medieval texts, and the consensus among historians is that no comparable concepts existed at the time under any other name.

Writers interested in the history and thought of the Edo period are more commonly drawn to *bushidō* and the texts usually cited as important sources are almost all products of this time, even if many of these were largely unknown before the modern period. The early eighteenth-century *Hagakure*, for example, which glorifies the warriors of an earlier age, was only published in the twentieth century. The idealization of the medieval battlefield was also reflected in narrative accounts of historical conflicts popularized in theatre and print. The Edo period is certainly the most significant source of historical materials used by modern *bushidō* theorists, but reading these sources can be problematic. Much of what is popularly considered to be the *bushidō* canon, including the works of Yamaga Sokō (1622–85), Nakae Tōju (1608–48), Yamamoto Tsunetomo (1659–1719), and Daidōji Yūzan (1639–1730), was carefully selected, compiled, and interpreted in the early twentieth century for political and practical expediencies rather than in the spirit of 'disinterested' scholarship. There is a strong, if often unconscious tendency for writers on *bushidō* to examine earlier samurai thought and behaviour through interpretive lenses ground primarily in Meiji.

The nostalgia felt by samurai in the Edo period also depended on another notion—that of belonging to an exclusive class, with some recent scholars arguing that the awareness of being *bushi*—translated as 'warrior' or 'samurai'—was what distinguished *bushi* from the rest of society.⁴ The nature of this awareness, however, varied considerably in different times and regions, especially towards the end of the Edo period. Another common theme found in documents relating to the samurai was the notion of 'the two ways of letteredness and martiality' (*bunbu ryōdō*), with almost all commentators agreeing that a balance between martial and civil virtues was essential. This ideal was important enough to be given priority in

¹ Hurst III, G. Cameron, 'Death, Honor, and Loyalty: The Bushidō Ideal', *Philosophy East and West* 40:4 (Oct. 1990), pp. 511–27; Friday, Karl F., 'Bushidō or Bull? A Medieval Historian's Perspective on the Imperial Army and the Japanese Warrior Tradition', *The History Teacher* 27:3 (May 1994), p. 339–49.

² Friday, Karl F. (2004), *Samurai, Warfare, and the State in Early Medieval Japan* (New York: Routledge), pp. 135–63; Hurst III, G. Cameron (1997), 'The Warrior as Ideal for a New Age', in Jeffrey P. Mass (ed.), *The Origins of Japan's Medieval World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), p. 210.

³ Conlan, Thomas (2003), *State of War: The Violent Order of Fourteenth-Century Japan* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press).

⁴ Kanno Kakuymō (2004), *Bushidō no yakushū* (Tokyo: Kōdansha gendai shinsho), p. 225.

the shogunate's official *Regulations for the Military Houses*. In spite of widespread agreement on the importance of balancing martiality and letteredness, however, the meaning of these two concepts was not always clear, nor was this binary only invoked by samurai. Similarly, with certain significant exceptions, the Confucian ideals and arguments that comprise the bulk of ethical texts from the Edo period were not always limited to a specific class, or even Japan. In a farewell letter written before participating in the famous Akō Incident, Ōtaka Gengo (1672–1703) justified his actions by stating that the ancient way of the warrior of China and Japan did not allow vendettas to remain unfulfilled.⁵ Conversely, the few texts that did address the samurai exclusively tended to restrict the applicability of their message to certain domains or even families. The *Hagakure*, which came to be described as the 'bible of *bushidō*' in the twentieth century, explicitly limited its scope to the Nabeshima domain of Kyūshū and portrayed samurai of other areas, especially the Kamigata region of Kyoto and Osaka, as degenerate city-dwellers.⁶ As Yamamoto Hirofumi has argued, there were no written works which large numbers of samurai could have used to understand the 'way of the warrior'.⁷

Pre-Meiji texts had little influence on the early development of modern *bushidō*, and came to be selectively invoked for legitimization only after the outlines of discourse had already been established. Nonetheless, their suitability for this purpose reveals a certain samurai-specific significance. This was one important criterion by which Edo documents were selected for modern *bushidō* canons, although other factors often weighed more heavily in the minds of editors. The retrospective uniform labelling of very diverse philosophies as '*bushidō*' has given the idea of a historical samurai ethic broad currency, and the great influence certain historical texts and incidents have on modern *bushidō* discourse means that they should not simply be dismissed. Furthermore, the gap between the abolition of the samurai and the beginning of *bushidō* discourse in Meiji was less than two decades, meaning that most of the early theorists had either been or at least had direct experience of actual samurai.

The portrayal of *bushidō* as a national character in modern Japan had precedents among Edo-period writers who differentiated themselves from an external 'other'. Luke Roberts uses the terms 'nation' and 'national' to refer to Japan after 1868, while describing certain aspects of early modern culture as 'protonational'.⁸ This study follows this convention, as the 'national' idea of a unique Japanese character was an important theme in many 'prenational' *bushi* writings. Protonational theories concerning Japan's martial nature, as opposed to the excessive—and

⁵ Smith II, Henry D., 'The Capacity of Chūshingura', *Monumenta Nipponica* 58:1 (Spring 2003), p. 15.

⁶ Maruyama Masao (1974), *Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 332; Roberts, Luke S. (2012), *Performing the Great Peace: Political Space and Open Secrets in Tokugawa Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press), p. 47.

⁷ Yamamoto Hirofumi (2006), *Nihonjin no kokoro: bushidō nyūmon* (Tokyo: Chūkei shuppan), p. 19.

⁸ Roberts, Luke S., *Performing the Great Peace: Political Space and Open Secrets in Tokugawa Japan*, pp. 8–10.

'weak'—civility of the Chinese 'other', were often discussed by warriors who saw their class as the designated embodiment of this character, even if they did not agree on their role in this context, nor on the degree of success with which they were fulfilling it. The relationship between civil and martial virtues was one of the most ancient and divisive issues in *bushi* thought, affecting protonational and national discourses on Japanese identity well into the modern period.

Within Japan, the Tokugawa shogunate (c.1603–1868) used legislation to separate warriors from the other classes, resulting in the development of certain forms of class consciousness. Furthermore, the paradoxical situation of the samurai in the Edo period—as a warrior class in a period of peace—was a considerable impetus for arguments justifying their exalted position in the social order. Before the early seventeenth century, opportunities for the practical application of martial skills made abstract theories regarding warriorhood seem unnecessary, and few texts from this time were deemed useful by modern *bushidō* theorists. Another factor that made early texts less relevant to *bushidō* was the absence of a defined warrior class beyond a certain elite before the Azuchi-Momoyama period (c.1568–1600), and the distinction between warrior and civilian among lower-ranking or part-time fighters was not always clear.⁹ Douglas Howland argues that only at the end of the sixteenth century did the concept of *mibun* (social status) become important in Japan as a representation of 'a conservative wish to reduce social fluidity and to fix social status'.¹⁰ During the fixing of the social classes in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the *bushi* were losing the practical distinction of being active warriors, as there was little or no opportunity for applying the martial skills that theoretically justified samurai domination of the political sphere.

During the Edo period, changing economic conditions meant that class distinctions were often at odds with social status, and scholars are fundamentally reconsidering the applicability of the concepts of 'class' and 'status' in this context. The situation was further complicated by regional differences, as certain groups were considered samurai in some domains but not in others.¹¹ This partially accounts for the great discrepancies in the percentage of the population that was considered to be samurai in different domains. Sekiyama Naotarō's analysis of the period 1870–73 concludes that the percentage of samurai in various domains ranged from under four per cent to more than twenty-seven per cent, with a national average of 6.40 per cent.¹² In spite of the ostensibly rigid divide between samurai and commoners, economic necessity resulted in a certain degree of fluidity, especially in the lower orders. Albert Craig points out that even reducing terms in official

⁹ Gomi Fumihiko has discussed the variety of warriors in late Heian and Kamakura, and the difficulties in differentiating between groups of warriors, pirates, and bandits. Gomi Fumihiko (1997), *Sasshō to shinkō: bushi wo saguru* (Tokyo: Kakugawa sensho), pp. 140, 256.

¹⁰ Howland, Douglas R., 'Samurai Status, Class, and Bureaucracy: A Historiographical Essay', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60:2 (May 2001), p. 355.

¹¹ Howland, Douglas R., 'Samurai Status, Class, and Bureaucracy', pp. 361–62, 374.

¹² Sekiyama Naotarō (1958), *Kinsei Nihon no jinkō kōzō: Tokugawa jidai no jinkō chōsa to jinkō jōtai ni kansuru kenkyū* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan), pp. 307–14.

posts could not accommodate the many samurai in need of work, and that '[B]y as early as 1705 almost a quarter of the vassals of the shogun were jobless. The best qualified were taken for posts appropriate to their rank, and the rest—including the young, the old, the sick, and the incompetent—were left idle'.¹³ As the period went on, samurai found their social status increasingly challenged by economically powerful commoners, some of whom purchased or received samurai privileges such as the right to wear swords. For example, the representatives of the Kaitokudō merchant academy in Osaka were granted permission to wear swords when meeting with government officials.¹⁴ Luke Roberts discusses situations where villagers assumed the mantle of samurai within the limits of village society, although they would give up this pretense if visited by officials from outside the community.¹⁵

Some samurai sought to legitimize their privileged social standing and a number of texts later incorporated into modern *bushidō* canons were products of this Edo period dynamic. Furthermore, of the few documents concerning pre-Tokugawa events taken up into modern *bushidō* discourse, the majority were written or heavily edited after the 1650s. Recent scholars largely dismiss the idealized accounts of medieval warriors as later products reflecting seventeenth-century concerns rather than actual battlefield conduct. Even Inoue Tetsujirō, who traced the history of the 'unique Japanese *bushidō* spirit' to the mythical Plain of High Heaven, admitted that *bushidō* had not been codified before the late seventeenth century, when the samurai had sufficient respite from warfare to pursue literary activities.¹⁶ With regard to warrior ethics, the importance of the earlier period lies primarily in providing Edo thinkers with a historical space and reference points that, in an idealized form, could be summoned to lend legitimacy to the domination of the political order by the samurai.

This romanticization of earlier history is evident in the enigmatic *Hagakure* of Yamamoto Tsunetomo, which was compiled in the early eighteenth century and structured around a series of anecdotes involving the ancestral lords of the Nabeshima domain. The *Hagakure's* famous opening line equating the way of the samurai with finding death set the tone for behavioural guidelines modelled on an idealized view of the battlefield. According to Yamamoto, the martial nature and readiness to serve gave *bushi* the right to have power of life and death over non-samurai, who were innately inferior.¹⁷ The institution of rudeness-killing (*burei-uchi*) did permit samurai to kill commoners for perceived slights, but the obvious social disorder that this practice was likely to cause meant that it was rarely

¹³ Craig, Albert (1961), *Choshu in the Meiji Restoration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), p. 13.

¹⁴ Najita, Tetsuo (1987), *Visions of Virtue in Tokugawa Japan: The Kaitokudō Merchant Academy of Ōsaka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 74.

¹⁵ Roberts, Luke S., *Performing the Great Peace*, pp. 34–35.

¹⁶ Inoue Tetsujirō (1901), *Bushidō* (Tokyo: Heiji zasshi sha), p. 41.

¹⁷ This view can also be found in the seventeenth-century *Kōyōgunkan*, which stated that it was not possible for commoners to be like *bushi*. Sagara Tōru, ed. (1968), *Kōyōgunkan, Gorinsho, Hagakure-shū (Nihon no shisō 9)* (Chikuma shobō), p. 83.

applied.¹⁸ This can be seen in an 1824 incident described by Roberts, in which a samurai wife killed an inferior in her house and claimed that he had been rude. The investigating officials did not dispute this, but still punished her and all members of the household for creating a situation in which a potential troublemaker was present in the private area of the home.¹⁹ There was no love lost on the other side of the class divide either, and the disdain most commoners had for the samurai has been described as 'legendary'.²⁰ Andō Shōeki (1703–62), for example, derided the samurai as parasites on society, while the National Learning scholar Kamo no Mabuchi (1697–1769) put forth the oft-cited social criticism that the more people one killed, the higher one's rank, inferring that the shogun was the biggest murderer in the land.²¹ By the mid-nineteenth century, however, increasing social mobility had blurred some distinctions among warriors and between warriors and commoners, and even many influential *bushi* questioned the innate supremacy of their class.

Along with the *Hagakure*, perhaps the most influential Edo period texts cited in modern *bushidō* discourse were the writings of the strategist Yamaga Sokō, who justified the exalted status of the samurai as follows:

The tasks of a samurai are to reflect on his person, to find a lord and do his best in service, to interact with his companions in a trustworthy and warm manner, and to be mindful of his position while making duty his focus. In addition, he will not be able to prevent involvement in parent-child, sibling, and spousal relationships. Without these, there could be no proper human morality among all the other people under Heaven, but the tasks of farmers, artisans, and merchants do not allow free time, so they are not always able to follow them and fulfill the Way. A samurai puts aside the tasks of the farmers, artisans and merchants, and the Way is his exclusive duty. In addition, if ever a person who is improper with regard to human morality appears among the three common classes, the samurai quickly punishes them, thus ensuring correct Heavenly morality on Earth. It should not be that a samurai knows the virtues of letteredness and martiality, but does not use them. Therefore, formally a samurai will prepare for use of swords, lances, bows, and horses, while inwardly he will endeavor in the ways of lord-vassal, friend-friend, parent-child, brother-brother, and husband-wife relations. In his mind he has the way of letteredness, while outwardly he is martially prepared. The three common classes make him their teacher and honour him, and in accordance with his teachings they come to know what is essential and what is insignificant...

Therefore, it can be said that the essence of the samurai is in understanding his task and function.²²

¹⁸ Ikegami, Eiko (1995), *The Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), pp. 244–45.

¹⁹ Roberts, Luke S., *Performing the Great Peace*, p. 31.

²⁰ Pincus, Leslie (1996), *Authenticating Culture in Japan: Kuki Shūzō and the Rise of National Aesthetics* (Berkeley: University of California Press), pp. 130–32.

²¹ Holmes, Colin and A. H. Ion, 'Bushido and the Samurai' *Modern Asian Studies* 14:2 (1980), p. 310; Kanno Kakumyō, *Bushidō no gyakushū*, pp. 39–40.

²² Yamaga Sokō (1970), *Yamaga Sokō (Nihon shisō taikei 32)* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten), pp. 32–33. Translation adapted from: Benesch, Oleg (2011), 'Samurai Thought', in James Heisig et al. (ed.), *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press), p. 1109.

Yamaga reasoned that one of the major differences between samurai and commoners was that the former had more time to focus on the nature of ethical behaviour and could therefore serve as moral guides for the rest of society, a role similar to idealized Confucian gentlemen. Yamaga's proposal was compromised by factors such as unemployment and low stipends, which rendered many *bushi* unable to make an idealistic 'Way' their 'exclusive duty,' and Yamaga spent much of his own life in search of a patron. In addition, the specific content of the 'Way' he outlined was not sufficiently clear or widely accepted so as to serve as a useful moral guide.²³ Furthermore, Yamaga's preferred term '*shidō*' lacks the overt martiality of '*bushidō*', instead invoking images of Confucian gentlemen-scholars. As Howland argues, although Confucian models were applied by Yamaga, Ogyū Sorai (1666–1728), and others to provide a theoretical justification for samurai rule, the parallels drawn between samurai and Chinese gentlemen-scholars were not entirely satisfactory, as contemporary Japanese scholars and foreign observers realized full well.²⁴

Both the *Hagakure* and Yamaga's writings were incorporated into the modern *bushidō* canon, but neither of these texts was especially influential before the twentieth century. Due also to its controversial and potentially subversive content, the *Hagakure* was only circulated within Nabeshima domain in manuscript form and not published until after the Russo-Japanese War. Yamaga's works were better known, but were not very influential during or immediately after his lifetime. Slandorous claims regarding Yamaga's association with the loyal retainers of Akō (discussed later on) as well as Yamaga's own exile to that domain, contributed to the closure of his school in the eighteenth century. His teachings were only kept alive in several *tozama* domains—'outer' houses that declared loyalty to the Tokugawa only belatedly—where they would be revived in the late Tokugawa period through the efforts of Yoshida Shōin and other activists.²⁵ The same was true of another text often cited by modern *bushidō* theorists, Daidōji Yūzan's *Primer on the Martial Way*, compiled in the early eighteenth century and first published in 1834.²⁶

Regional and temporal variations in the warrior class over the Edo period, which tended heavily towards bureaucratization for those samurai fortunate enough to be employed, resulted in a perceived need for definition and legitimization of the role of the *bushi* in an age of peace. Towards the end of the period, especially, samurai felt considerable pressure to identify characteristics that made them different from and superior to the other classes. The sense that their position was under threat contributed to the vitriol directed towards commoners in the writings of some samurai, but, especially towards the end of the Edo period, both samurai and non-samurai increasingly rejected the notion that there were fundamental differences between the classes. Depending on the specific region and period, the stratifications within the *bushi* and commoner ranks created situations in which the

²³ Takayanagi Mitsutoshi (1960), *Bushidō: Nihon bunka kenkyū* 8 (Tokyo: Shinchōsha), pp. 3–7.

²⁴ Howland, Douglas R. 'Samurai Status, Class, and Bureaucracy', p. 356.

²⁵ Tucker, John Allen, 'Tokugawa Intellectual History and Prewar Ideology', *Sino-Japanese Studies* 14 (2002), pp. 40–41; Uenaka Shuzo, 'Last Testament in Exile: Yamaga Sokō's *Haisho Zampitsu*', pp. 127–28.

²⁶ Kōsaka Jirō (1987), *Genroku bushigaku: 'Budō shoshinshū' wo yomu* (Tokyo: Chūōkōron), p. 15.

differences within classes were often greater than between them. Henry D. Smith relies on the stratification within the ranks to explain a discrepancy in accounts of the 1703 Akō Incident, which famously involved forty-seven masterless samurai, only forty-six of whom surrendered to the authorities and were condemned to *seppuku* in the aftermath. According to Smith, the forty-seventh and lowest-ranked samurai, Terasaka Kichiemon (1665–1747) was dismissed by the group immediately following the event as they did not want his status as a foot soldier (*ashigaru*) to reflect on the rest of them and cause difficulties or embarrassment. The government responded by simply striking his name from the list of accused.²⁷

The ostensibly elevated status of *bushi* in the Tokugawa social order, and their awareness of the same, were the most meaningful theoretical factors connecting the majority of *bushi*. Their status was primarily a political and professional distinction, and the very diverse religious, behavioural, and ethical views of the samurai were more likely to be determined by influences other than their profession. This diversity makes it possible to select certain examples of warrior writings and behaviour to argue for almost any interpretation of the ‘nature’ of *bushi*, and such discussions tend to be a reflection of the times and situation of their authors rather than an accurate depiction of any greater ‘way of the samurai’. Samurai were naturally aware of their special social status, but this consciousness of belonging to an elite varied greatly depending on time, location, and the specific situation of the individual *bushi*, especially if they were economically inferior to some commoners. For many samurai, the differences within their class seemed greater than those between the classes, and class consciousness did not serve as the basis for a widely accepted ethic, nor was it easily integrated into nationalistic modern *bushidō* ideologies that could serve a supposedly classless society.

THE AKŌ VENDETTA IN SAMURAI CONSCIOUSNESS AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While it is difficult to find common points of reference that could be used for a broad comparison of warrior thought before 1868, the Akō Incident of 1703 is one event that often serves as a fulcrum for attempts to excavate a Japanese warrior ethic. This event is frequently mentioned in discussions of samurai ethics and behaviour, and has influenced modern *bushidō* discourse from at least 1901, when Inoue Tetsujirō described the loyal retainers of Akō as the manifestation of *bushidō*.²⁸ The Akō Incident became one of the most popular sources for samurai narratives by the mid-eighteenth century and from Meiji onward was incorporated into *bushidō*-related reassessments that posited it as the key event in Japanese warrior history.

The number of individuals directly involved in the incident itself was relatively small, especially when compared with some of the rebellions and uprisings that

²⁷ Smith II, Henry D., ‘The Trouble with Terasaka’, *Japan Review* 16 (2004), pp. 5, 38–41.

²⁸ Inoue Tetsujirō, *Bushidō*, p. 51.